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THE INDIAN CHILD IN THE CLASSROOM.

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IN EDUCATING ANY GROUP OF CHILDREN, THE SCHOOL'S FIRST RESPONSIBILITY IS TO EACH STUDENT AS AN INDIVIDUAL, HELPING HIM TO DEVELOP HIMSELF AS FREELY AND CREATIVELY AS POSSIBLE. TO MEET THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN, EACH TEACHER MUST UNDERSTAND THE TOTAL ENVIRONMENT OF EACH CHILD, ACCEPT THE CHILD AS HE IS, AND LOVE AND RESPECT EACH CHILD FOR HIS INDIVIDUAL WORTH. THE NEEDS OF INDIAN CHILDREN ALSO REQUIRE THE UNDERSTANDING, LOVE, AND RESPECT NECESSARY FOR ALL CHILDREN, BUT THERE ARE BASIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN INDIAN AND NON-INDIAN CHILDREN WHICH TEACHERS MUST UNDERSTAND. ONE OF THE MAIN DIFFERENCES IS THE WAY IN WHICH THE WORLD IS PRECEIVED, THE NON-INDIAN REACTS TO A MADE WORLD, WHILE THE INDIAN REACTS TO THE WORLD AS IT IS. INDIANS ARE A DISADVANTAGED MINORITY GROUP WHO HAVE 2/3 THE LIFE EXPECTANCY, 1/2 TO 1/3 THE LEVEL OF EDUCATION, LESS THAN 1/3 THE INCOME, AND 7 TO 8 TIMES AS MUCH UNEMPLOYMENT AS THE NATIONAL AVERAGE FOR ALL AMERICANS. THEY ALSO EXPERIENCE POORER HEALTH, A HIGHER INFANT MORTALITY RATE, AND MORE FREQUENT ILLNESSES. MANY INDIANS HAVE NO DESIRE TO INTEGRATE INTO THE MAIN STREAM OF AMERICAN LIFE, BUT PREFER TO RETAIN THEIR OWN IDENTITY. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "JOURNAL OF AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION," VOL. 3, NO. 3, MAY, 1964, PP. 13-19. (ES)

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THE INDIAN CHILD IN THE CLASSROOM

Veda Stone

The things I am going to say are not new. You may not agree with the things I am going to say. Much of what is said in a short talk, on such a complex problem, is of necessity over simplified—fragmented—and cannot be thought of as a definitive statement. But the things I say are things in which I believe. My beliefs have been arrived at and are the results of personal observation and information obtained by reading and discussion with both Indians and non-Indians. These ideas do not necessarily reflect the thinking of all of my co-workers—but I hope they *do* reflect my respect for and my devotion to the Indian people of Wisconsin.

It has been some years since I have taught young children in the classroom. My teaching years included rural teaching—all the eight grades—small town and city grade school youngsters in such communities as Rice Lake and Madison—and some experience on the college campus. I wince when I think of the youngsters I must have "missed" by not really "seeing" them and communicating with them, therefore I share the responsibility for some of their future failures. So when I speak of some of the *lacks* in meeting the needs of children in the classroom please know that I include myself—and am not setting myself up as some sort of fountain of knowledge or picture of perfection.

Before we approach the Indian child, let us briefly take a look at the needs of *any* child in the classroom. The first responsibility of the school is to each student as an individual, helping him to develop himself as freely and creatively as possible. This presupposes that we are able to *see and assess each pupil* correctly, so that we begin where he is and help him to develop to his fullest.

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The most important *need* then for any child in the classroom is to be *seen* as he is. I can't impress upon any professional person a point more important than this, because it has been found more often than is comfortable that some of the children with the greatest needs passed, as so many little shadows, before the eyes of the professional world that touched them. Because the child didn't exert much nuisance value, his silent cries were left unanswered, his tremendous needs left unmet. In many instances we look and see not.

For one in any of the helping professions working with children, but especially the teacher, may I say that in my mind there is still no machine, no instrument, no test that is any more important than the powers of *observation* that the teacher has. He sees the child in action and interaction with adults or other children. He sees his performance in the classroom, he is physically close to him, in daily contact with him. Of what value to the child is the cold figure of a low IQ on a piece of paper if we have failed to observe that the child can't see or hear, or has been at the breaking point because he has gone to bed actually cold and hungry too often?

It has been said by Theodore Greene, a professor of philosophy at Yale, "The school is the only institution whose *primary* responsibility is scholarship and education, the pursuit of knowledge, and the cultivation of the mind. The first responsibility of the school is to each *student* as an individual. It will help him to develop himself as freely and as creatively as possible, at the same time help him to discover how he can best be of service to his fellow men. In short, it will seek to educate him for a life of creative responsibility, a life in which he will not only make the maximum use of his potentialities but in which he will also be eager to use his various capacities in a socially responsible manner—achieving this objective by doing full justice to the individual's native spontaneity on the one hand and, on the other, his need for discipline and training."[1]

Not only must the teacher have the ability to observe or really "see" the child but he must have something else of equal importance: he must have a kind of attitude toward children that allows a certain climate to develop in the classroom—a climate of acceptance and respect—yes, let's say it, a climate of love.

School houses have personalities. If you've visited many, you know this the moment you step inside the door. School rooms especially have personalities. And school rooms are fortunate that are presided over by men and women who love children in the sense that Milton meant when he said:

> Freely we serve,
> Because we freely love, as in our will
> To love or not; in this we stand or fall.[2]

These teachers take into consideration the child's need for discipline and training but the child feels the attitude of complete acceptance and respect (love) and it is in this climate of perceiving and accepting that a real helping relationship, a real meeting of needs can begin. This is the crucial point: Not only must the teacher *have* the warm attitude of acceptance of the child, but the child himself *must feel it, perceive it,* or no meeting takes place. As Rogers says: "If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth, and change and personal development will occur."[3]

I suppose this kind of teacher looks upon the profession as "a calling," truly a vocation . . . the kind of inspired, creative teacher one finds in Sylvia Ashton Warner's book, TEACHER[4] and in her earlier book SPINSTER.[5] I recommend TEACHER for all teachers of Indian youth, although it is about the teaching of young Maoris in New Zealand. If you have read it you will recall at the close of the book she sits remembering:

> "What is it, what is it, Little One?" (As a five year old comes in.)
>
> I kneel to his level and tip his chin. Tears break from the big brown eyes and set off down his face.
>
> "That's why—somebodies they broked my castle for notheen—Somebodies."
>
> I sit on my low chair, take him on my knee, and tuck the black head beneath my chin.
>
> "There—there—look at my pretty boy — — —."

There are a number of other books that can help to increase one's understanding of children of different cultures. One or two that have been suggested for teachers of Indian children are THE CULTURALLY DEPRIVED CHILD,[6] by Frank Riessman; the other one is Harrington's THE OTHER AMERICA.[7] Neither one is about Indians but helps us to better understand what poverty does to families.

A recent issue of the Phi Delta Kappan[8] is filled with articles that are "musts". In one of them a school psychologist says:

> I now understand why even bright lower class children do not do nearly as well in school as middle class children of equal or even lower ability; why bright lower class children drop out of school even when intellectually capable of doing the work. They never feel part of the institution, their school is not theirs; their team is not theirs; their classmates are not theirs.
>
> But here in school, middle class children are on home grounds; it is *their* school, their teachers, their clubs, their team, their classmates——(Can't you see them, clean, scrubbed fresh—swishing a bit—self assured?)
>
> Parents of lower class children also feel strange and remote from the institution, frightened by its conventions. They've had little education. They feel ill at ease. They are rarely capable of taking the first step. And so here, too, the accepting teacher involves the parents in school activities in order to raise their educational and social aspirations for their children to give the parents a better understanding of the educational process and what the school is attempting to do.

Therefore, to meet the needs of the child in the classroom, the teacher must of necessity go beyond the walls of the school. He must view and understand the setting out of which the child appears each day (or fails to appear.). He must know the parents, the community environment which helped to shape this child in all his positives and negatives, the culture which marked him as different from Johnny who sits in the seat ahead of him or Mary across the aisle.

In my judgment, to meet the needs of Indian children in the classroom, we must not only accept the things we have said so far, but we must go farther. I believe it is more than a matter of *degree* of need; it is a difference in kind.

I feel the Indian child is different from the non-Indian child even if he comes from similar economic brackets or geographic areas. But before we look at the Indian child in the classroom, let us take a brief look at our Indian friends in general: They were once not long ago said to be a dying race.

Today Indians are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in our country—in our state. We have approximately 600,000 Indians in the United States; the 1960 census shows 14,297 in Wisconsin.

Centuries ago in America, education was measured by a knowledge of the forests and streams, of the traditions and the crafts of the people—success by proficiency of the hunt. It was education necessary for survival. For some Indians today it is still a form of education—a way of life—but for the larger number today a broader foundation of knowledge is a necessity.[9]

I wish I could paint a rosy picture of our Indians today but, with isolated exceptions, wherever one looks, or listens, or reads, one finds the Indian is a disadvantaged American.

We call him a member of one of our minority groups. By minority we mean not fewer in number, but lower in the power scale, one of the groups lacking the physical, cultural, social and economic characteristics of those who have achieved status, power, or prestige.

When we look at the Indian today, we find he has only 2/3 the life expectancy, 1/2 to 1/3 the level of education, less than 1/3 the income, and 7 to 8 times as much unemployment as the national average for all Americans. About 90% of their housing is sub-standard, "some of it truly shocking," says E. Reeseman Fryer.[10]

These conditions are not new. Read the 1961 Task Force Report to the Secretary of the Interior—where—and I quote:

> As the educational level of the general population advances, the gap between Indians and non-Indians will widen—unless efforts are increased to provide educational opportunities for all school age Indian children, to improve the quality of education through adequate and qualified staffing, and to increase opportunities for adults who have been denied regular schooling. . . . Of those Indians who enter college, few are as well equipped either in social adjustment or academic preparation as non-Indians of corresponding age.[11]

Some gains have been made in regard to Indian health and education. While more Indians are voting and taking part in the social and political life of the communities, the number for whom these changes have *not* taken place is still large and is increasing rapidly.

From the beginning, our Indians have felt differently about their status than other minority groups. While Indians did not receive the right to vote until 1924, and two states did not ratify this full citizenship until after World War II, all Indians have not felt it a privilege to become citizens of the United States.

I'm sure you know that the Florida Seminoles have still not signed a peace treaty with the United States Government but we continue in a state of peaceful coexistence.[12]

Alexis de Toqueville, visiting our country in 1831 and writing on democracy in America, saw very clearly this difference.

> The Negro makes a thousand fruitless efforts to insinuate himself among men who repulse him. The Indian on the contrary—lives and dies in the midst of his dreams of pride—far from desiring to conform his habits to ours, he loves his savage life as the distinguished mark of his race and repels every advance to civilization.[13]

Three months ago the National Congress of American Indians met in annual convention at Bismarck, North Dakota. Newspaper headlines stated:

"Tribes Seek to Keep Identity—Indian Wants Rights—But Not Integration" and went on to say,

> While the Nation's attention is focused on the battle for Negro civil rights the Native American Indian is waging his own independence struggle in reverse—the Indian is fighting to remain a separate and distinct race.[14]

These are not ideas that are held by American Indians living a thousand miles away from us, but by many of our Wisconsin Indian friends who are quietly going along, trying to work out ways of adjusting to today's society and still keep the meaningful parts of their culture.[15]

In May 1962, a Wisconsin anthropologist said to a group of teachers, nurses, and social workers:

> I wish to emphasize the fact that after 300 years of white contact, the Wisconsin reservation Indians still maintain a different culture than that of the surrounding non-Indians. While much of the traditional culture has been lost there remains a residue largely expressed in a value system somewhat at variance with that of American culture. A realization of this difference in motivation and goals is important for anyone working with him.[16]

Another facet of the difference was expressed to me by two friends who have long lived in Indian country—one a professor, one a mission pastor—"Indians" said they, "relate better to people than to functions, therefore it is important that those in the helping professions who deal with them are people who are sensitive to this difference. One of the main differences between the Indian and the non-Indian is the way in which the world is perceived; we react to a made world, the Indian reacts to the world as it is.

"We look at the world and want to change it; the Indian looks at the world and becomes a part of it. The Indian has a oneness with the world that we do not know—water - earth - sky—all these have special meaning for him."

Regardless of our differences, we have taught him in these few hundred years to seek and to be given—rather than to achieve—and so began the generations of poverty.

Read James Officer's article "Informal Power Structures Within Indian Communities."[17] You will find we did this deliberately, to break up old patterns of leadership. It was the reservation system—(the large reservations were established in the period between the Civil War and 1900)—which brought into play the increasingly important role of the Federal Government in the lives of Indians, and where the really big decisions affecting Indian people were made *for* them. Most of the Indian programs through the years provided for little, if any, real consultation with Indians and seldom was the issue of getting their consent ever raised.

Keep in mind as you think of these things—as you recall the poverty, the poor health, including higher infant mortality, more frequent illnesses, lack of education, chronic unemployment and sub-standard housing—that when Jean Nicolet came to Wisconsin shores in 1634 (just 300 years ago) with his landing at Red Banks at Green Bay that he and other Canadian French Missionaries found *self reliant and independent native Americans living on this land.*

Think of this as you hear Philleo Nash's words as he spoke on "Guided Acculturation."

> In a society where everyone's needs are great and where there is so little to go around, sharing is a positive value and striving is not necessarily approved.
>
> Who can plan well for the *future* when the present brings so little?
>
> What is the merit of strict time sense when another hour, day, or week will bring little more satisfaction than the present?[18]

Few teachers wind up in a hall of fame, but is there any greater feeling than the one of quiet satisfaction a teacher experiences, when she has drawn out a child who has previously refused to respond, or when she saw something special in a quiet one that others passed by? Perhaps she'll *never hear* the boy say: "She was the one who saw something in me," or the girl: "She believed in me and this kept me going"—life is like that. But the teacher knows in choosing the profession that it is a demanding one. The teacher knows that for every child we lose, we are all less strong; we share in the responsibility for failure.

I would like to close with a quotation that I think applies to all of us in the helping professions, and is especially applicable to teachers—the molders of youth.

> In every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances, and of no matter what parents, the potentiality of the human race is born again; and in him, too, once more, and of each of us, our terrific responsibility towards human life; toward the utmost idea of goodness, and of God.
>
> Every breath his senses shall draw, every act and every shadow and thing in all creation, is a mortal poison, or is a drug, or is a signal or symptom, or is a teacher, or is a liberator, or is liberty itself, depending entirely upon his understanding; and understanding, and action proceeding from understanding and guided by it, is the one weapon against the world's bombardment, the one medicine, the one instrument by which liberty, health, and joy may be shaped or shaped towards, in the individual, and in the race.[19]

I repeat:

> In every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances, and of no matter what parents, the potentiality of the human race is born again—

and herein lies our challenge and our responsibility.

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